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ABSTRACT

This report is the first in a series exploring a variety of the organizational spaces being developed under strategies to change and improve K-12 education in Minnesota. One strategy seeks to create an environment that focuses on creating new and different schools and with them new choices for students and families. These reports are designed to inform policymakers, educators, families, and others on what has been happening to create new and different schools. This first report is intended to provide background on Minnesota's alternative-education programs, stimulate discussion, and highlight a number of important policy questions. It is not meant to be formal academic research or an exhaustive description of what alternative-education programs are or could be. Alternative-education programs are similar to charter schools in that they create space to design new and different learning models. But they enroll more students. This report specifically addresses the following: (1) what alternative-education programs are; (2) who their students are; (3) how their students differ; (4) what the schools do differently with students; (5) why not much is known about them; and (6) what role they play in the current discussion about creating spaces through which new learning models can emerge. (WFA)

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Alternative-Education Programs

The 'Quiet Giant' in Minnesota Public Education

The first in a series of reports on the changing face of public education in Minnesota

June 2003

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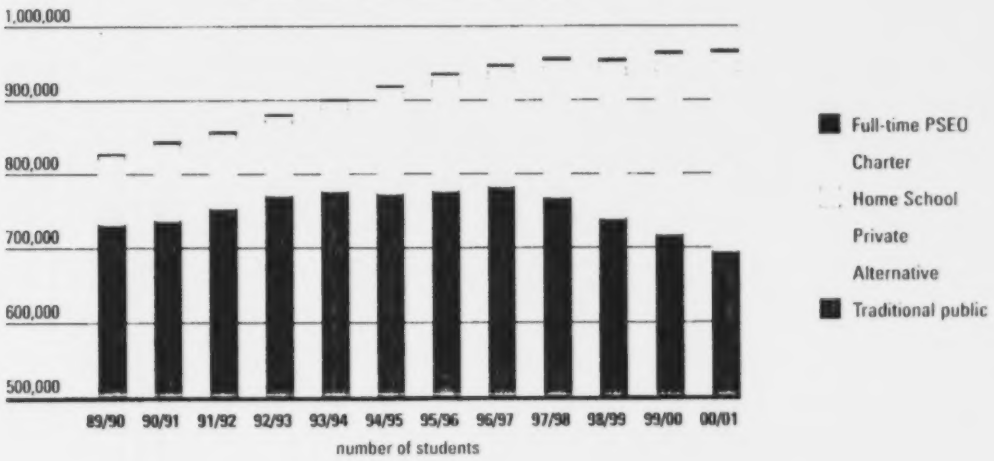
About this report

America's policymakers, educators and families are now using two parallel sets of strategies for changing and improving K–12 education. One set relies on a variety of incentives and consequences to try to **change and improve the schools we have**. The second seeks to create an environment that focuses on **creating new and different schools** and, with them, **new choices for students and families.**

For almost two decades, Minnesota has experienced significant growth in a number of new and different educational choices, new schools and new educational programs—both inside and outside the traditional district setting. These trends are documented in the bar graph below.

Enrollment in Minnesota Schools



This report is the first in a series exploring a variety of the organizational spaces being developed under this second strategy. These reports are designed to inform policymakers, educators, families, and others on what's been happening to create new and different schools.

This first report examines what we generically call alternative-education programs. They are similar to chartered schools in that they create space to design new and different learning models, but at the moment enroll far more students. Few know the extent to which they've grown or the contribution they are making to the improvement of public education in Minnesota. We were surprised ourselves to learn they far outnumber Minnesota's chartered schools in programs and enrollment. In fact, they now constitute a sizable and growing share of all public school students in our state.

This report seeks to answer the following: What are alternative-education programs? Who are their students? How are their students different? What do the schools do differently with students? Why don't we know much about them? What role do they play in the current discussions about creating spaces through which new learning models are allowed—even encouraged—to emerge?

We find that alternative-education programs have been highly successful in serving a population of students not served well in traditional settings. As the first educators to employ the strategy of seeking legal authority to create new and different schools, alternative-program leaders have much to teach leaders of newer nondistrict schools. They also have much to gain from accessing the legal autonomy and more certain funding levels that newer laws provide. This is particularly true today, as rapid growth and accountability standards cause districts to increase pressure to make alternative programs more traditional.

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There is a growing national interest in creating schools entirely new and different

Since the mid-1970s, Americans have been grappling with how to improve public education, recognizing it as the primary vehicle for advancing knowledge, which has quickly become our nation's key strategic asset in today's global economy.

Political leadership became interested in the condition of education and of the schools our children attend, when business people grew vocally concerned about the knowledge base of their employees. Two tracks, or strategies, emerged as efforts to improve.

The most visible has been the strategy of fixing the traditional schools, the K–12 institution itself, from within. After the release of the Nation at Risk report in 1983, saying we must improve the nation's education system to preserve its international status, this seemed the natural course to take.

Governors came together to put pressure on the system: Jim Hunt in North Carolina, Lamar Alexander in Tennessee, Bill Clinton in Arkansas, Rudy Perpich in Minnesota. They asked K–12 leaders to implement changes like smaller class sizes, site-based management, accountability testing—all internally, at existing schools. Institutional leaders have been working ever since to improve the system that historically served them well.

The country has watched and participated in these improvement efforts for 20 years. We've spent billions of dollars. While many have worked hard, with good intentions, the results have been disappointing. Almost no one thinks we have made the progress we need to make while using this strategy alone.

The other track toward improvement—creating schools entirely new and different—is not as well known. But we have, in fact, been moving on this track, too—with a great deal of national leadership coming from Minnesota.

Those employing this strategy have been acting on their belief that it is no longer prudent to rely only on the strategy of incrementally fixing existing schools if we are going to improve K–12 education. They contend that the traditional K–12 institutional culture limits the capacity to change the mainline operations that are not serving large numbers of students well.

The culture, the "invisible architecture," of traditional school districts is preventing those within from being able to recognize, and act on, the need for change. Thus, the only way to overcome the existing problems is to create and preserve policies that allow more people and groups—not just districts—to create new and different schools.

This strategy not only calls for the creation of new and different learning models, but also for the creation of new and different organizational spaces through which new learning environments can emerge. We can't even begin to imagine what might be created when our system increasingly allows space for, and encourages, the development of new and different models of learning.

Many people see charter laws as the first opportunities to create new learning models—the first "results" of this little-known strategy. The ability to charter, however, was preceded by other examples of creating schools new. Some have existed for decades, like alternative-education programs. Other examples are just now being created. Still others—particularly those involving technology and new, more engaged roles for teachers, students and families—are yet to be fully developed. Undoubtedly, many are yet to be conceived. All will be needed if we are to meet the challenges and opportunities of our increasingly competitive global economy.

Adapted from Joe Graba's remarks to the Minneapolis Rotary Club, October 2001. Graba, an Education/Evolving Leader, is a Senior Policy Fellow at Hamline University. As a former teacher, legislator, and state education administrator, he has influenced Minnesota teaching and learning at every level for the last four decades.

INTRODUCTION

There is a seldom noticed but growing sector of public education in Minnesota that is quietly revolutionizing the way a sizable percentage of our state's students learn: alternative-education programs. Their very name suggests that they're different from traditional public schools—and they are.

Alternative-education programs can alter the culture and basic ground rules that can stifle change in conventional public education. For three decades their pioneers have been creating personalized, flexible learning environments for students who are "at risk" of not completing high school. And their tremendous growth and high levels of student and parent satisfaction help make the case for having a conscious policy of creating new and different schools to improve student outcomes.

When we started this quest to learn more about Minnesota's alternative-education programs, we thought we were exploring a small group of schools—a marginal and tiny slice of our state's educational options. But we were immediately stunned by the sheer magnitude of Minnesota's alternative-education programs, as well as their sizeable enrollment levels and upward trends.

In Minnesota, there are now about 160 alternative programs, with more than 600 sites. Districts have organized as Area Learning Centers (ALCs), particularly outside the Twin Cities. ALCs and Alternative Learning Programs (ALPs) are created by one or more school districts. There are also a growing number of contract alternative programs that are operated by nonprofit organizations under an agreement with a local school board.

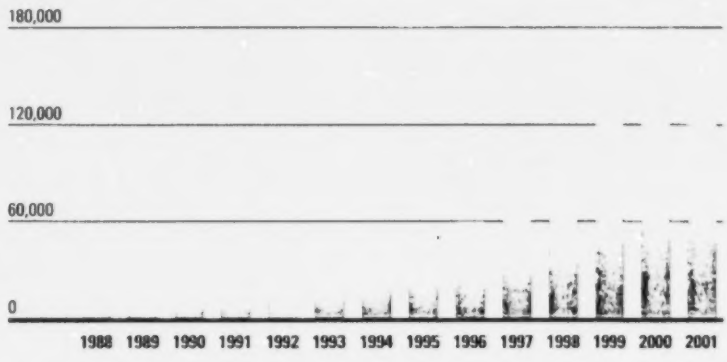
All alternative programs are publicly financed. By law, ALCs and ALPs receive 90 percent of state general education revenue per pupil through the district of residence of their students.[1] Ninety-five percent of the revenue follows students to contract alternative programs.[2]

Although largely kept in the shadows and not well understood, alternative-education programs are a "quiet giant" in Minnesota's system of public education. They currently serve almost one fifth of the state's secondary students on a full- or part-time basis.[3]

And alternative enrollments continue to rise.

Since 1987, when alternative programs were formally recognized in Minnesota law, enrollment (including elementary, middle, and secondary students) has climbed from 4,050 to an estimated 180,000 students today. That's 25 percent more than the total combined enrollments of Minnesota's chartered, private, and home schools; and 12 percent more than the combined enrollment of the state's three largest school districts: Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and Anoka-Hennepin. The graph, above, documents the rapid growth in alternative program enrollment from 1988 through the 2001–2002 school year.

Alternative Education Program Enrollment in MN



The sheer numbers compel educators, parents, students, policymakers, program developers, and taxpayers to pay more attention to this rapidly growing sector of public education. That's why Education/Evolving undertook this inquiry. First, to better understand this quiet giant in Minnesota public education; and second, to stimulate discussion as we begin to identify the complex policy questions related to Minnesota alternative-education programs.

This report begins to answer these questions: What are "alternative programs"? Why should this quiet giant matter to Minnesota policymakers, educators, and families? What can we learn from them and begin to apply elsewhere? How should their performance be judged, and how should they be held accountable? Where do they fit in to the ongoing discussions about "new and different schools" and "new choices?" And, in particular, Why are students

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attending them, and why do so many students and their families believe they are a different and, in some cases, superior environment for their learning?

We find that alternative programs have achieved great success in helping districts serve students who don't do well in traditional settings. As the "older siblings" of chartered-schools (and other sectors creating new and different schools), alternative-program leaders have much to teach other new, nondistrict school leaders about what has improved school and student success over the years.

Alternative-program leaders have much to learn and gain from newer programs, as well. Most important, alternative leaders can convert their programs to chartered schools, thereby gaining autonomy from districts when designing and managing their programs. As districts increase pressure to make alternative programs more traditional, conversion can allow alternative-program educators to maintain the integrity of their new and different programs. Conversions could benefit districts, alternative programs, and the students they serve.

A teaching and learning relationship between alternative-program leaders, chartered-school leaders, and leaders of other nondistrict programs would be a mutually beneficial one. Program leaders could share in the burdens that those who seek change must consistently overcome to maintain credibility.

Policymakers, educators, and families, should preserve and understand alternative programs and allow for the creation of new and different schools out of respect for the diverse ways in which students learn. Any other response would serve to inhibit the great strides Minnesota must continue to make toward improving "school" for all of its students.

From humble beginnings in drop-in centers and empty storefronts on main street

As early as the 1965–1966 school year, Minnesota education leaders and social service agencies started to create alternative-education programs to try to improve learning for students not well served by traditional learning environments. Using drop-in centers and empty storefronts and money from social service agencies, they targeted students who had already dropped out of school but had since taken interest in hanging out at the centers for whatever reasons.

The students were labeled "at risk" of not completing high school. Such students are defined by today's law as falling into one or more of the following categories: low performing, excessively truant, in danger of not graduating or behind in "satisfactory completion" of coursework, victims of physical or sexual abuse, chemically dependent, speaking English as a second language or having limited English proficiency, excluded or expelled from traditional schools, pregnant, young parents, recently homeless, or having problems with mental health.[4]

Most alternative programs were strikingly different from traditional schools. They didn't have the usual courses and classes, but instead offered a variety of new learning models, often hands on, that better fit students' learning styles and schedules as well as their social and emotional needs. Alternative-program leaders were trying something new—something they believed would better educate these types of students. Perhaps more than anything, these programs personalized education for each student. They provided a smaller environment that included more direct and lasting relationships with adults.

It wasn't long before leaders of Minnesota's alternative programs realized they were meeting an important need of public school districts. Assistant principals and guidance counselors were starting to recommend alternative programs to at-risk students so they could focus more on the students who did not disrupt, or who were better suited for their "course and class" learning models.

At the same time, many at-risk students and their alternative-program teachers found that the nontraditional, new, and different atmospheres were more conducive to their learning. Finding success, alternative-education leaders sought to gain additional financial and political support for what they were doing, quite effectively, with hard-to-reach students.

Some alternative-program leaders began to develop contractual relationships with districts. Districts would transfer some of their at-risk students to alternative programs and pay a portion (often only half) of their per-pupil revenue to the programs in exchange for delivery of services they had once provided. Although more fairly funded today, arrangements like this still exist and are being developed. Social service agencies typically design and manage the learning programs, as well as the budgets, facilities, and other services offered by these types of programs.

Some districts wanted more control, so they developed their own programs, allocating a portion of revenues to their alternative programs as a line item in their budgets. These arrangements also continue to exist today. Usually internal office personnel or a staff member in charge of alternative programs designates money to individual schools and keeps a close eye on, even participates in, program design and management.

In Minnesota, alternative-education programs must be state-approved. Today there are 33 state-approved contract alternative programs. These schools are called "nonpublic, nonsectarian" by the state because they are run by nonprofit social service agencies or organizations that contract with a school district to provide services to at-risk students. Contracted programs may opt to be "learning year program sites," which means that they operate on a year-round basis.

One agency contracted by Minneapolis Public Schools describes their alternative program as a mutually beneficial public-private partnership. "It positions each partner to offer at-risk youth the opportunity to succeed in school: the school district provides substantial resources, curricular expertise, and a valued credential; while [the agency] provides individual attention and support, accessibility within the neighborhood and the flexibility necessary to respond to the individual needs and circumstances of at-risk youth."[5]

State-approved district alternative programs are split into two categories: Area Learning Centers (there are 80 ALCs in Minnesota) and Alternative Learning Programs (46 ALPs are in the state).

ALCs must provide middle-level through adult learners with year-round educational services. ALCs have the option to do targeted services, which are services provided in addition to traditional schooling for elementary and middle-level students.

ALPs can be learning-year or traditional-year sites. They differ from ALCs mainly because they are more closely tied to their host districts (ALCs serve students across districts) and because they have the ability to designate the ages and grade levels of students to be served. In both ALCs and ALPs, all students must have Continual Learning Plans. Instructors may include independent study as a component.[6]

Both contracted and district-run arrangements have produced, and continue to produce, a variety of schools. They vary by learning model, size (though all have relatively small enrollments), environment, hours and seasons of operation, students served, special programs, scope of services, and number and types of teachers.

For example, some schools serve pregnant teens by offering emotional support and practical advice while providing education needed to stay up-to-date with traditional credits. Others offer chemical dependency treatment or vocational training. Some offer hands-on learning, while others use more traditional curriculum and teaching methods.

Over time, as the number of programs grew, district leaders, along with alternative-program leaders, began to recognize the programs' strengths in serving at-risk students. Districts began to formalize their relationships with the programs. And it became increasingly obvious that alternative-education programs were the primary agents of education for a growing portion of the students that the state was allocating money to the districts to serve.

Rather than continuing to allow districts to decide which portion of per-pupil funding they would allocate to alternative programs, program leaders argued that the students in their programs should be guaranteed their "fair share" of funds. The state mandated districts to pay 50 percent of state aid in 1987[7], a percentage that has increased gradually over the years to what it is today—90 percent for ALCs and ALPs, 95 percent for contracted programs. Minnesota statutes also mandated that alternative-education programs be attended only by at-risk students, that the programs have access to districts' regular programs and services, and that students completing the programs can choose to graduate and receive diplomas from their traditional neighborhood or community high schools. These rules still exist today.

A surprisingly large and growing sector of public education

With the foundation of state law and the guarantee of funding, more and more districts and social service agencies decided to offer alternative-education programs. Some observers believe that districts' interest in alternative programs increased as state legislators mandated increased levels of funding. Others say that districts have increased the number of alternative programs to compete with neigh-

boring districts, lowering the possibility of losing students and the revenue that follows them.

But regardless of why so many programs now exist, enrollment in Minnesota's alternative-education programs has grown at a rapid pace. Programs that had initially served only a small group of middle and high school dropouts at teen centers enrolled 4,050 students when the first schools were officially designated in 1988. In 2002, just 14 years later, state-approved alternative programs served 167,010 students. Programs serve nearly 180,000 students today.

Alternative-program educators say that some 30 percent of all secondary school students in Minnesota are enrolled in alternative programs at some point during their high school years.[8] Many more eligible students who would like to enroll are not able to do so. At South Saint Paul ALC, for example, the waiting list starts growing almost immediately after the school year begins and grows steadily throughout the year. Alternative-education programs are, in fact, the quiet giant of Minnesota public education.

Those directly involved in alternative programs—students, teachers, administrators, and parents—offer a number of thoughts on why they have experienced such rapid growth in both numbers of schools and in enrollment:

Students believe the programs may better serve their individual learning needs, and find a way to enroll.

- Students who are "out there" (already not attending school because they dropped out or were expelled) are increasingly finding and attending alternative-education programs.
- More students are frustrated by their experience in traditional schools and are looking for alternatives. Sometimes administrators in traditional settings tell them they are too far behind to graduate on time after only their first semester of ninth grade. After hearing this again and again they're ready for an environment that assures them they can succeed and graduate.
- Increasingly, well-to-do students that have gotten into drugs are entering alternative-education programs. And suburban alternative programs are admitting more high-skilled students who are simply "bored" in traditional settings.
- Students are increasingly afraid of large school environments. They fear gangs, drugs, and not knowing the people sitting next to them in classes or roaming the same halls. They believe that, by placing too many people in small spaces, those running traditional settings are asking for an uprising.
- Students who have a lack of family structure at home find stable environments at alternative programs, with instructors and administrators who care about their home lives and help them through personal problems that may be interfering with learning.

Districts have created more programs, and transferred more students into them, out of self-interest.

- Any successful organizations that bring in more customers (in this case, students who were not in school) will be noticed, and districts will want to replicate them.
- Some district leaders are increasingly pushing chronically suspended or expelled students out of their traditional programs. Assistant principals say, "Here's a list of schools you might qualify for. Don't come back." Some students say they were quietly pushed out the back door. Alternative-program educators confirm that this is often true. On paper it looks like the students chose the alternative program, but administrators urged the students out without recording their actions on paper. District leaders think this will help eliminate problems and increase the success rates of their traditional programs.
- Districts are permitting more alternative programs, and are allowing students in their schools to attend them, in order to remain competitive with other districts that have alternative programs. They don't want to lose per-pupil funding that would follow the students to programs located in other districts.
- With increasing emphasis on accountability and testing, traditional district schools may be tempted to get low-performing students "off their books."

Districts are recognizing that students learn in diverse ways.

- While in the past about 20 percent of students who

entered alternative programs returned to traditional schools after getting "back on track," only about five percent of students are returning today.[9] Alternative-program retention has increased because district leadership is beginning to acknowledge that students who returned to traditional schools often cycled back again to alternatives. Districts now recognize that providing a stable environment where students are learning is more effective for student learning than cycling them back to programs that don't work for them.

- As populations increase and diversify, there are more students who need English language services or other transitional assistance in order to perform well in a traditional setting. Districts are creating more alternative programs to educate this growing sector of their overall student population.

Distinct cultures formed in alternative programs improve relationships between teachers, students

When asked why alternative program enrollment has increased so dramatically, alternative-program students and educators often place the most weight on teacher-student relationships. Both groups say that the new and different environments at alternative programs have allowed for the creation of distinct cultures that work better for students.

The most noticeable difference? Students say personalized, trusting relationships with teachers and administrators. The students feel cared about and get the individual attention they need to learn.

Students enrolled in these programs observe more positive attitudes among teachers, comparing them to what they say are the generally less enthusiastic, more demanding attitudes of teachers they have had in traditional settings. Students who believe they were "defeated young" in traditional schools are able to develop relationships with teachers in alternative programs. Teachers often function as "extended families" that care about their social and emotional problems. Teachers are able to help students adjust or maintain their learning schedules through rough times.

Teachers in traditional settings had to "stick to the schedule", many students say, and didn't always realize why students weren't able to complete their homework or come to class on a particular day. Some students, for example, have jobs to help support their families; and some have so many family responsibilities that it isn't practical to complete assignments on short notice. Teachers in traditional settings, some say, can't know these things, much less provide support, with all of their work and all of the students they have to deal with in big schools—whatever their intentions.

Generally, alternative-program students perceive their former teachers as having little interest in them and say their former assistant principals were "out to get them." One alternative-school founder explains that his research revealed that these perceptions contribute to the two behaviors students say caused them to fail in traditional settings: missing too many days and hanging around with unsuccessful students. Few students reported that classes were too hard. Because alternative programs are able to focus more on the teacher-student relationship, absences and negative influences decrease. Students, then, are more successful in their studies. Students place high value on the differences that relationships with teachers make in their ability to learn at their own pace, with their own focus.

Not unlike the students, many teachers consider alternative programs a good fit. They get to work with smaller groups of students (usually 15 to 30 per day, versus 150) and feel they can really make a difference for students who have struggled with learning in the past. Many teachers believe that students are capable of growing and succeeding when faced with real-life challenges, and are willing to take the risk of leaving the traditional learning settings to act on their beliefs while teaching in alternative programs.

Many believe the risk pays off. Teachers find that they have a much larger role in establishing the culture of alternative programs. With a role in governance, they are able to establish small classes, individualized curriculum, and the integration of education, employment, and social services. They can--and many do—set a culture that values personal relationships with students and recognizes teachers' extended role to be ready to understand and respond effectively to students whose problems outside school seriously limit their classroom performance.[10]

Adjacent school districts with two very distinct administrative environments

To get a better idea of the diverse environments districts have created for the administration of alternative-education programs, it may be useful to look at the differences between alternative programs in Minneapolis and those in Saint Paul. But when thinking about these two examples, it's important to remember that they are certainly not the only environments for alternative programs that administrators and others have developed, or could develop in the future.

Minneapolis alternative programs include both district-run and contact arrangements

Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has two types of alternative programs, with different sources of administrative support:

- District alternatives, where the district designs and operates the schools using its own faculty, staff, and facilities.
- Contract alternatives, where the district contracts with various social services agencies (usually nonprofit), on an individual basis, for all aspects of the design and operation of the schools.

Minneapolis has at least seven district alternative schools. Three serve grades 9–12. Others serve 6–12, 10–12, and K–12; and one is run at Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center.

There are at least 28 contract alternative schools in Minneapolis. Ten serve grades 9–12. Seven serve grades 7–12. Two serve 6–8. The rest serve K–5, K–6, 6–12, 7–10, and 10–12.[11]

Social service agencies that the district contracts with for the design and operation of schools include local affiliates of national organizations such as the Urban League, Volunteers for America, and Ronald McDonald House, or local organizations such as East Side Neighborhood Service, Inc. or Merriam Park Community Services. Each contract school has its own board, which is typically the board of the agency itself. They usually include teachers. The agency director is usually the director of the program.

Some contract alternative programs belong to the Metropolitan Federation of Alternative Schools (MFAS), a member-funded organization that provides services and support to nontraditional schools. Each member school pays two percent of its annual budget to MFAS in exchange for this support. Minneapolis Public Schools provides similar services to district alternative programs.

Of the approximately 28 contact programs in Minneapolis, 22 are members of MFAS. MFAS currently negotiates one contract with Minneapolis Public Schools for all 22 school sites (actually for the 15 nonprofits that run them—some run more than one school).

As of fall 2003, however, the district will contract with agencies on an individual basis. According to MFAS, Minneapolis Public Schools realizes the benefits of the relationship between MFAS and its members, but must change the status quo because the district's lawyers need to establish "contractual privities" with the individual service providers. MFAS does not expect that the new contractual arrangements will significantly alter how things operate. All contracts for agencies that are members of MFAS will state that MFAS will collectively negotiate the contract as the representative of the agencies. Further, each contract will contain provisions requiring the district to involve MFAS if there are issues involving any of the member school sites.

Other services that MFAS provides include staff development, technological services, a curriculum resource center, driver's ed, science equipment and sound/light systems available to "check out" for use in individual programs, teacher development fund (for pursuit of license or advanced degrees), health screening, and creating public awareness of the effectiveness of the programs. MFAS also serves as the organization for North Central Association (NCA) accreditation for its member schools. Again, district alternative schools go directly to MPS for these types of services.

Saint Paul alternative programs generally have closer ties to the district

Saint Paul Public Schools administrates alternative programs quite differently. Saint Paul Area Learning Center (ALC) is the main administrator of alternative programs for Saint Paul Public Schools. No contracts are involved. The ALC finances, guides, and monitors 50+ elementary, 13 middle school programs (all after school and/or summer programs that supplement traditional instruction), as

well as nine secondary programs, all targeting populations with varying needs.

All these programs are individually called "ALC satellites." Each ALC satellite has control over its general operations. Most use site councils, made up of parents, teachers, and students to provide guidance and direction for the program. The Saint Paul ALC employs one principal who provides general oversight for all of the satellites. Three assistant principals divide up the satellites and provide more specific oversight, including help with legal issues, curriculum, and staff.

It should be noted that Area Learning Centers are found in many districts across the state. An ALC is a special type of alternative program that must serve students year-round. They receive extra funding for this "extra time" needed to get students through the same learning completed during the shorter year used in traditional-year settings.

There is only one alternative program that is not in the Area Learning Center structure in Saint Paul—the Guadalupe Area Project (GAP). This contract school was a project of then Governor Rudy Perpich, who got Saint Paul to establish a contract while he was in office.

Saint Paul Public Schools consciously chooses not to contract with alternative programs. In fact, Merriam Park Community Services, which runs a program called Intensive Day Treatment in the Saint Paul area, contracts with Minneapolis Public Schools. Leaders wanted a contractual relationship, and Saint Paul doesn't "do" contracts.

Saint Paul Schools is confident about its decision to move almost totally away from contracts in favor of creating a set of small learning programs (satellites) that are under direct control of the Saint Paul Public Schools ALC Administration. The district says that through trial and error, it has learned that the satellite model allows for more effective oversight of budget, staff, and curriculum than other arrangements.

According to alternative-program leaders, Saint Paul Public Schools realizes that secondary alternative-program students may not transition back to traditional programs from their ALCs, so they've dropped some of the "get them back on track" philosophies that they had once used for students of alternative programs. In 2001–2002, the ALC satellite programs served over 2,300 full-time, unduplicated students. Full-time ALC programs graduated 222 students during 2001–2002. Saint Paul Public Schools says many of these students may never have earned diplomas without the ALC opportunity.

To accommodate growing demand at the secondary level, in 2001–2002 Saint Paul ALC expanded one satellite and increased enrollment at another by adding a modified college class schedule to its other learning options. Before the expansion, waiting lists were growing at a rapid pace.

Still, by law, all elementary and middle school programs are designed to keep eligible students caught up in literacy skills and math, with the understanding that districts will enroll them mainly in traditional learning settings. In 2001–2002, 6,823 elementary and middle school students were dual-enrolled, meaning that they attended traditional schools as well as an ALC (for part of the day or after school). Elementary summer school programs served 8,029 eligible students to prevent what has been referred to as "summer loss" of what was learned during the traditional year.

To preserve ability to keep schools new and different, alternative-program leaders avoid the spotlight

When we started putting this report together, we called groups like Education Commission of the States (ECS), a group that helps states shape education policy, as well as reporters at Education Week and other education news resources, asking what they knew about alternative-education programs. They thought we were talking about any "experimental" arrangements, such as chartered schools or interdistrict open enrollment. This led us to explore why alternative programs are so little known and understood?

If so many students benefit from alternative-education programs, why aren't their leaders and the districts that house them loudly proclaiming that they are making a significant contribution to bettering education for students who are at risk? Why are achievements rarely discussed? Why aren't they asking education writers to spread the word? The answers we get from those involved are speculative, but consistent.

Some alternative-program leaders and teachers suspect that district officials may be embarrassed to admit that their nontraditional schools, or schools they contract for, are better serving some populations. As enrollment in alternative programs increases, some speculate that district leaders are hesitant to admit to alternative programs' suc-

cess because of what it implies for the future of traditional district schools—the ones they are paid to manage.

Alternative-program leaders say it is just such speculation that keeps those who work on alternative-education programs quiet about their achievements, further contributing to the lack of public knowledge about the success of such programs.

Many alternative-program educators told us that growth and the standards debate has invited increased pressure, from the districts, to become "more traditional." This leads some to believe that if they start to get too vocal about the advantages of alternative programs or if they publicly discuss expanding the number of schools, then they risk losing their jobs. More concerning, they might compromise the future of alternative programs, thereby eliminating what was once their only vehicle for creating new and different learning settings.

One insider who has been dealing with such pressure said, "I liked it better when no one knew what we did!"

Dramatic growth and federal No Child Left Behind Act bring increased scrutiny, new policy questions

If alternative-program educators believe that avoiding the public eye protected the new and different nature of alternative programs, then the attention brought by dramatic growth and the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act understandably raises questions about the future of such programs. Will new and different programs be sustainable, or will districts increase pressure to make alternative programs more traditional?

The aim of the No Child Left Behind Act is to create an atmosphere of accountability for improved academic achievement for all students at all public schools. Minnesota policymakers' decisions about how to best accomplish those goals can greatly impact the ability to sustain new and different learning environments in general, and especially at alternative programs.

Policymakers are likely to have a keen interest in the academic achievement levels of alternative programs' large segment of Minnesota students. This is particularly true as policymakers pay increased attention to the fiscal side of public education; and as they consider further consolidating Minnesota's teaching and learning into fewer administrative units and learning sites.

Furthermore, state policymakers and districts are likely to have an increased interest in how Minnesota measures achievement. While alternative programs tend to measure success by more than just test scores, districts will face consequences if they don't increase the cumulative test scores of all students. This may have a particular impact on some districts that have been accused of "parking" low-performing students in alternative programs, in part to get alternative-program students' standardized test scores "off their books."

For these reasons, the No Child Left Behind Act may cause districts to pressure alternative programs to incorporate what districts tend to view as less risky, more traditional learning models, or face closure. Alternative-program educators expect districts to act in this way unless Minnesota policymakers begin to broaden the meaning of "achievement."

While federal and state policymakers are still determining the ground rules, it appears that, for the first time, districts will have to include alternative-program students' progress when determining whether those students and their districts are making "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) toward proficiency in uniform state standards for math, reading, and science. And, alternative students' progress will be measured by the same tests used in traditional district settings.

It also appears that the new federal education policy will require districts to include accountability measurements from alternative-program students according to their district of residence—not according to the district that runs or contracts with the alternative program that the students actually attend. (Remember, students may move across district boundaries to attend particular ALCs.)

Since districts will be evaluated not only according to how well their overall student populations are doing in achieving AYP, but also by the performance of various demographic subgroups, districts are bound to have an increased interest in how and how well alternative programs are teaching the at-risk population of students. The increased scrutiny is likely to heighten the existing tension over how much autonomy over program design should be given to alternative-program educators.

Alternative-program educators and their students are not likely to favor this renewed allegiance to traditional learning programs at the expense of their distinct, new learning environments. The requirements of the No Child

Left Behind Act, then, might create an incentive for alternative-program educators to find ways to seek further autonomy from districts.

Some alternative-program leaders talk about "getting chartered". This means using the newer charter school law to obtain more complete autonomy over, and accountability for, program design and finances, and to expand the student populations that can attend their programs. All students would have the option of enrolling in these new and different programs before they fail, and for whatever reason. They may be attracted to the small size, for example, or personalized learning environments, or school hours that better match their life situation. Several alternative programs, in an effort to achieve these goals, have already converted to chartered-school status.

As one educator who left teaching at an alternative program to start a chartered school put it, "The districts see their ALCs as revenue—that's it! The autonomous nature of the charter law makes this [his new school] work. Without the ability to keep the program different, the kids won't come. People accuse ALCs of being a 'holding pen,' and that's exactly what many become!"

Some alternative-program leaders worry that publicly mentioning the idea of converting to chartered schools risks not only their job security but future alternative education. They are very quiet about their explorations. At the same time, the No Child Left Behind Act may offer an incentive for some districts to push for conversions.

If past contentions about some districts transferring students to alternative programs to get their test scores "off the books" are true, then many districts where alternative-program students reside will now face hefty consequences when they count the students toward AYP. But converting alternative programs to chartered schools would help districts avoid these consequences while allowing alternative programs to risk reaching required achievement gains, or AYP, within their new and different environments.

Each chartered school calculates AYP independently—regardless of the districts of residence of the students enrolled. Thus, converting alternative programs to chartered status would allow the debate about how to measure achievement to go on without threatening whole districts, which may be serving some students well in traditional settings.

It is important to note that federal and state legislators are still writing the official rules for how the No Child Left Behind Act will be implemented in Minnesota and other states. Many are involved in a debate over what the rules should and should not include. For example, a number of alternative-program educators who describe themselves as "more progressive" than others are already asking the state to resist making tests the measurement for achievement in traditional, alternative, and other new and different settings.

Policymakers, educators, and families could use this ensuing debate as a healthy opportunity to discuss how Minnesota determines student and school success. Alternative-program educators and others involved in the "new and different schools" strategy are calling on policymakers to be wary of those who use the tension as a reason to take steps to reverse Minnesota's nearly two-decade trend toward choices for an increasingly diverse student population.

Understanding that "kids differ; schools need to differ" would make alternative programs work better

It is clear that alternative-education programs have many strengths, but as with anything else, insiders say policymakers and district administrators could make improvements. Many alternative-program educators relate improvement to removal of the state mandate that the entrance requirement for alternative-education programs is that students must fail.

Students and teachers, they say, should be able to exercise choice before they fail in a traditional setting. The current set-up implies that alternative-education programs can best serve their students by preparing them to succeed in, and eventually return to, a traditional setting. This structure fails to respect that alternative programs are able to account for the very diverse ways in which students learn.

A good number of alternative-program educators like the fact that the schools serve only students who are at-risk, saying that the specific population was in vital need of new and different programs. But there are also a good number who are dissatisfied that alternative programs are not open to all students who wish to choose them.

They argue that laws governing alternative programs

do not recognize that traditional settings may not work well for many of the students who do not meet "at risk" eligibility criteria—that new and different learning environments may work better for noneligible students as well. Districts do not recognize the fact that many students who are not at-risk may want a new and different school setting. Some alternative-program leaders have heard students say they were purposefully truant so they could be eligible for the alternative programs.

Sometimes public descriptions of alternative programs state, inappropriately, that the programs are for "delinquent" or "deficient" students, instead of for students who are not served well in traditional environments. Rather than realizing that their traditional settings may not work for a good number of the students they are paid to serve, districts sometimes label students "delinquent" for not fitting into the traditional mold.

Rather than allowing students who attended alternative programs to take pride in graduating from a school with learning methods that worked well for them, the state requires programs to issue diplomas from the students' local district high schools. Alternative-program educators who have fought this policy have been told by Minnesota's Department of Children, Families, and Learning, that the policy must be maintained to avoid "labeling." The implication is that it is a bad thing to go to alternative programs. Many alternative-program leaders wish the state would help diminish this stigma.

Other needs include state allocation of more money (at least the remaining 5 to 10 percent) to alternative programs so students get their "fair share" of resources and so programs can improve teacher recruitment. Additionally, the state and districts could provide leadership in finding space to house these programs.

Many alternative-program educators would like districts to incorporate pieces of their new learning models in traditional settings

A good number of alternative-program educators, particularly those interested in more options for student learning across education sectors, say that perhaps the biggest inhibitor to alternative education is districts' failure to incorporate pieces of new learning models in traditional settings.

Keeping alternative programs entirely separate gives districts the ability to say that they have alternatives for some students, yet the alternative-learning models remain in their "other" schools. Alternative-program educators are frustrated that districts are not responding to the evidence their programs have presented about needed change within traditional schools. They're disappointed that districts are not modifying their own programs.

In fact, many alternative-program leaders believe districts are doing the opposite—pressuring alternative programs to look more like traditional schools. They say, "Why don't you implement traditional classes this year?" or "Why don't you force students to do traditional-looking classroom instruction three days a week?"

Alternative-program educators, who know the students, are confident that in most cases such strategies won't help the students they serve to come to school and learn. Some alternative-program leaders will even say that any particular alternative program will work for some, but not all, students. They believe that the diversity of available programs contributes to the entire group's success. Other leaders want to avoid friction with districts in order to preserve any ability to innovate. Since districts control their contracts, they don't want to "rock the boat."

Leadership of the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (MAAP), a professional membership organization dedicated to improvement of alternative education and program options, is committed to progressive programs despite pressure to become more traditional. There is some internal friction, however, among MAAP membership (over 800 professionals) as a whole, along a progressive to traditional continuum.

One alternative-program educator said that no matter how much those on the traditional side of the continuum value different learning models, many do not want to lose their ties to the districts. "Teachers didn't enter the profession to be entrepreneurs. They like to have a scapegoat. They like not having any accountability. They fear converting to chartered schools, and then not having someone to hide behind when, or if, things get tough."

The "older siblings" of chartered schools

Alternative-education programs (ALCs, ALPs, and contracted alternatives) were the predecessors of chartered

schools, employing the same strategy for improving student learning—the strategy of seeking legal authority to create new and different learning environments.[12] But, how do alternative and chartered programs differ? And what can each set of new and different public schools learn from the other?

First, both alternative programs and chartered schools are public, meaning students attend them for free, though entities that run them are sometimes for-profit, nonprofit, private nonsectarian, or sectarian organizations.

Alternative programs have been in existence since the 1960s, and were legislatively recognized in 1988. Chartered schools came on the scene in 1991, when Minnesota was the first state in the nation to pass a law allowing autonomous creation of learning programs and management of schools. Today there are over 600 alternative programs in the state serving about 180,000 students, and there are 76 chartered schools serving about 12,500 students.

Per-pupil funding follows the student to a chartered school, flowing directly from the state. In alternative programs, the state allocates revenue to the local district that in turn allocates most of the money to the contracting entity or ALC or ALP office. The district keeps some of the money, however, to pay for things like state reporting, oversight, and other administrative functions.

Students attending chartered schools are counted by the state as "belonging" to the chartered schools, and they get diplomas from their chartered schools. All students, regardless of credits earned or social status, are welcome to attend.

Students attending alternative programs are counted as belonging to the local districts. They get diplomas from their local district high school regardless of what program they attend. Only students meeting one or more of the "at risk" eligibility criteria are allowed to attend.

Sponsors bring chartered schools into existence. Sponsors can be any number of public or private organizations, including a school district. Chartered schools and sponsors negotiate three-year contracts that by law cannot be terminated without cause. Chartered schools are responsible for providing education under contract terms and state law.

In contrast, only districts can decide if an alternative program can exist. Since alternative-program students always "belong" to the district, the districts contract with programs to provide education that the districts are responsible to provide. Contracts, typically one-year long, can be terminated without cause. Programs without contracts—district alternative programs—can also be closed at any time and for any reason.

Some observers argue that those who designed the charter law benefited from the lessons learned as alternative-education programs grew: The full amount of per-pupil funding goes directly to the schools; contracts are longer and sponsors must have cause to break a contract; students can get diplomas from the school they actually attended—take pride in the learning environment that worked for them; and all students, not just those who are at risk of not graduating, can benefit from programs offered at chartered schools.

These benefits indicate that perhaps the most important difference between the charter law and the laws governing alternative-education programs is that chartered schools have full autonomy from districts—full autonomy from the rules and regulations that have traditionally governed "school." Alternative programs seem to have partial autonomy over the design of the programs, but the district can always threaten to close them for whatever reason in order to pressure leaders to form more traditional settings.

In a March 2003 meeting with Minnesota legislators, Howard Fuller, chair of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) and the National Charter School Alliance, said we need "radically different, small schools" to improve learning for students not served well in traditional settings. As former superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, he found, "Tweaking [traditional] high schools does not work in Milwaukee." The way "school" is structured has to change, and the relationships, the way adults treat students, needs to change.

When a Minnesota senator asked whether alternative programs accomplish this, Fuller responded that alternatives get the relationship part down, but not the structure part. Alternative schools, still under district authority, can only "tweak" somewhat the schools we already have. Even if leaders are able to create a really different, successful program in which the adults and students have positive relationships, the district always has the authority to make the program more traditional.

It is the autonomy provided under the charter law that really allows the structure to change. Autonomy allows for the creation of new and different schools that can better

accommodate the varying needs of Minnesota's students. According to Fuller, autonomy is the most important difference between laws governing alternative programs and the charter school law.

Alternative programs have an important role in the strategy to expand opportunities for creating new and different schools

It's time educators, parents, students, policymakers, program developers, and taxpayers begin to understand and learn from alternative-education programs. They are the largest and longest-running education sector employing the strategy of developing a legally supported environment for the creation of new and different schools, and new choices for students. They are the first to realize that we cannot solely rely on the strategy of "fixing" existing schools.

Alternative-education leaders have been radically changing "school" for three decades. In Minnesota, where there are more than 600 programs involving an estimated 180,000 students, alternative-program educators are responsible for creating the majority of new and different learning environments for students not doing well in the traditional settings. To continue serving so many students well, alternative-program leaders must begin to recognize their programs as part of the strategy, as part of the overall movement, to create schools new and different.

As the first educators in the movement, alternative-education leaders have much to teach educators in newer non-district schools. They can contribute their experience and knowledge about what has improved school and student success over the years. Also, creators of newer laws and programs can continue to benefit from alternative-education leaders' hindsight assessment of what could have made programs work better.

Alternative-program leaders can continue to show policymakers, educators, and families that autonomy from traditional authority can remove some of the largest obstacles that faced alternative programs over the years—such as the inability of all students to attend and access to adequate financial resources. They can show program developers their successful models for teaching students who did not do well in traditional settings, and share their wisdom for developing positive teacher-student relationships.

Alternative-program leaders can also teach leaders of newer nondistrict programs about the sophisticated services and professional groups they've developed to provide administrative services and leadership, as well as guidance in policymaking. Groups like the Metropolitan Federation of Alternative Schools and the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs have significantly advanced alternative programs' sense of coordination, sense of community, and ability to progress as a group over the years.

Alternative-program leaders have much to learn and gain from newer programs, as well. Most importantly, alternative programs—whose growth has brought increased pressure to be 'more traditional'—can now seek full autonomy over the design and management of their programs under Minnesota's charter school law. This could benefit districts, alternative programs, and the students they serve.

A teaching and learning relationship between alternative programs and newer nondistrict programs is a mutually beneficial one. Program leaders can share in the burdens that those who seek change must consistently overcome to maintain credibility.

Some chartered schools, for example, suffer from lack of resources, or business management and financial issues. Many alternative programs in Minneapolis have overcome similar problems in their longer experience by establishing programs like the Metropolitan Federation of Alternative Programs (MFAS). MFAS could offer membership to chartered schools, or work with chartered-school leaders to set up similar organizations. Either way, chartered schools would benefit from the experience already gained by alternative-education programs.

If some alternative-program leaders continue to be interested in having the legal authority to create any kind of school—particularly schools that any student can attend—then chartered-school leaders can help them to convert their programs to chartered schools and therefore access legal autonomy in creating and managing programs.

The more autonomous nature of the charter law may become particularly important to some alternative-program leaders as districts increase pressure to make programs more traditional. This is because lack of complete autonomy from the districts may make it more difficult to sustain the distinctive nature of alternative programs.

Autonomy is desirable for another important reason. Constrained by law to serving only at-risk students, the

alternative programs as a whole are defined more by whom they serve than by what they do for whom they serve. They should be defined by what contribution they make to education as a whole.

With the ultimate goal of maintaining their ability to create new and different learning models, both alternative program and chartered school leaders, as well as leaders of other new and different schools, have an interest in understanding and respecting each other. All involved, including administrators, educators, policymakers, and the families that choose new schools, are bound to have similar needs and goals.

Today, at least six common needs and objectives are discussed often, but separately:

- Preservation of legal authority (and autonomy) to create new and different learning environments.
- Expansion of public relations to promote awareness and appreciation for legal autonomy to create new and different models of schooling. Leaders also desire promotion of the successful models they've already created, and the learning that has resulted from them.
- Improvement of financing arrangements available to new and different schools, so there are incentives—rather than deterrents—for those who improve learning among students not served well in traditional settings.
- Expansion of access to high-quality facilities to house programs.
- Development of different ways to measure student and school "achievement."
- Inclusion of the voices of students in policy discussions about the future of Minnesota public education.
- Development of an awareness of and respect for the variety of ways in which students learn, and the variety of reasons why they attend—or do not attend—school.

If the growing number of people employing the strategy to create new and different schools worked toward these needs and goals together, recognizing themselves as part of a larger movement to serve all students well, the desired outcomes might more quickly, and more thoughtfully, be achieved.

ENDNOTES

[1] MN Statute 123A.05. Subd. 2. "Reserve Revenue. Each district that is a member of an area learning center must reserve revenue in an amount equal to at least 90 percent of the district average general education revenue per pupil unit minus an amount equal to the product of the formula allowance according to section 126.C.10, subdivision 2, times .0485, calculated without basic skills revenue, transportation sparsity revenue, and the transportation portion of the transportation revenue adjustment, times the number of pupil units attending the area learning center program under this section. The amount of reserved revenue under this subdivision may only be spent on program costs associated with the area learning center. Compensatory revenue under this section must be allocated according to section 126.C.15, subdivision 2."

[2] MN Statute 124.D.69.

[3] When one considers that Minnesota's alternative programs serve some 77,000 secondary students (grades 7–12), and Minnesota's total enrollment in public secondary schools is about 411,840, the programs are now serving roughly one-fifth of the state's secondary students on a full- or part-time basis.

[4] MN Statute 124D.68. Graduation Incentives Program.

[5] James Long and Robert A. Rutter. PYC Alternative School: A Public/Private Partnership That Succeeds With At-Risk Youth. 1-2.

[6] Information in this paragraph is from Handbook for: State Approved Alternative Programs (for new and existing programs). February 2003. Continual learning plans, updated annually, address learning objectives and experiences, assessment measurements and requirements for grade level progression. MS 124D.128.

[7] The law providing for this, and other Area Learning Center organization, is MN Statute 123A.05. Center Programs and Services – MN Statute 123A.06. Graduation Incentives Program (eligibility criteria) – MN Statue 124D.68. Learning year pupil units – MN Statute 126C.05 Subd. 15. All laws are summarized or printed in full in the State Approved Alternative Programs Handbook available at http://cfl.state.mn.us.

[8] Official numbers are not available. While published numbers indicate how many students are attending at any given time, we were unable to locate any numbers describing what percent of high school students enrolled in an alternative program during their high school years.

[9] These numbers are speculated.

[10] James Long and Robert A. Rutter. PYC Alternative School: A Public/Private Partnership That Succeeds With At-Risk Youth.

[11] Information from Minneapolis Public Schools Web site: http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/registration/alternative_school.shtml

[12] The International Association of Learning Alternatives (IALA) defines "alternatives" as any alternative to traditional schooling, including ALCs, ALPs, contracted alternatives and chartered schools. They are working to get this definition more widely accepted and utilized. This discussion separates alternative-education programs (the former three) from chartered schools, however, for comparison purposes.

CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS

As part of its mission, Education/Evolving works to bring the voices of Minnesota students to policy discussions about the changing face of public education. What do students like and dislike about their nontraditional options? Why did they choose to attend a nontraditional school? Do they notice differences between their traditional and nontraditional schools—between the teachers, cultures, amount accomplished, ability to learn?

To include their thoughts in this report, Kim Farris-Berg, author, met informally with MAAP STARS students at their annual conference in April 2002. Students attended the conference to present projects and compete in areas of employment interviews, public speaking, team management decision-making, community service, entrepreneurship, and more. MAAP STARS are selected leaders from individual alternative programs and ALCs that are affiliated with the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs. The students were mostly in grades 10–12 and of diverse genders and races. They responded eagerly and openly to questions.

Why are you attending your ALC or alternative program?

"My mainstream school was too big. It had too many students."

"You were walking down the hall and you only knew a few of the people around you. You put that many people into a building that can't even hold that amount and you're just asking for a mob—our age or not."

"In my old school there were too many kids without trust in the people around them [students and teachers]—you just don't feel safe. Different cliques hate each other. This doesn't happen in the ALC."

"Our ALC teachers know us."

"I didn't want to end up like my friends. They were all getting messed up on drugs and stuff."

"Me too. My old school was becoming a big drug ward. I was sick of it. I wanted a normal, 'real world' environment."

"My friends were getting into trouble. I was starting to get into trouble with alcohol and drugs, but I saw what was happening to my friends. I didn't want to end up like them. I am doing well now at a sobriety high school."

"I was the class clown, and I was not getting my work done. It was BORING!"

"In my old school, there was too much talking by teachers. They stand up there all day and talk. I wasn't getting anything from that."

"Me too. I needed more hands on and more individual attention. I get a lot more done now."

Could your former district high school have done anything differently, to make learning easier for you?

"It's just too big!"

"You're given assignments that just don't have anything to do with you because they don't know you."

"There is no recognition of YOU."

What do you like about your ALC?

"My friend and I both couldn't pass the state math test at our mainstream schools. When we met here, we made a pact to study together. And we did. We studied every day, doing problems and teaching them to each other. We both just passed. We did well, too."

"[The mainstream teachers] told me I wouldn't graduate on time, and I thought I couldn't. Here, I feel limitless. I can do what I want, and I will accomplish things."

"My school is working out a way to get credit for learning while you're also working for the community and getting paid. That is a good option for me."

"I get to do my work at school. I CAN'T work at home. At the mainstream school they would lecture us and then send us home to read and write up what they said!"

"Teachers in mainstream have too many kids to deal with."

A number of students mentioned that they experience a greater sense of community in their alternative program.

"I'm more motivated now. You go from people telling you that you have to go (to school), but you won't graduate, to where you actually want to go and want to graduate."

"It's the golden rule. Teachers respect me so I respect them."

"Teachers know my name and I can call them by their

first name. If I didn't get my homework done, they ask why. Then we work out a plan to make up work. Sometimes they already have an idea of why, because they know me."

"I used to have an authority problem, but I don't now. Now I get personal attention; I trust authority figures. I feel teachers care about me. It's easier to get my grades up. In my old school I was behind, and people always reminded me of that. Now I will definitely graduate on time."

"At my old school, you are either popular or you're not. Here everyone—we're all very different—but everyone knows each other and gets along. We're all diverse at my school right now, but we get along just fine."

"They ask about my home life."

"I used to skip all the time. It was really bad. But now I don't. I have more trust with my teachers—I can call them by their first names. They treat me like a person. I feel more respected, so teachers get through to me."

"Why can't every school be small? Learning environments need to be small!"

If you could have attended a school that is similar to your ALC when you started high school, would you have done better than you did (academically or socially)?

"I would have been much more on target from the beginning if I STARTED at an ALC."

"If I started at my ALC, maybe I wouldn't have gotten into trouble."

What do your parents think about you attending an ALC?

"My parents were like, 'You're going to an alternative school? Are you a bad kid?'"

"Yeah, my parents thought that too. I went to an ALC for summer school before I started my regular year there. My parents noticed right away, 'We don't have to fight with her anymore!' They would fight with me every day about (going to school). Now I WANT to go! They're happy about that, so they like the school!"

About this project

Education/Evolving is a Minnesota-based project committed to helping K–12 education evolve and meet the challenges, demands and opportunities of the 21st Century. We are individuals who have been working for some years on questions about the future of public education in Minnesota and elsewhere in the country. We work together as a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University in Saint Paul.

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FOLLOWS the evolving elements of K–12 education—the thinking and the policy actions—in Minnesota, in other states and at the national level.

ASSISTS the evolution where we can, by analyzing situations and looking for opportunities for change. We try to explain to policymakers why things work the way they do and how incentives can make a difference. We design new arrangements and we suggest new ways of coming at problems and opportunities as they present themselves.

REPORTS to others about what we observe, sharing both our own work and related work we see being done by others. This is done through traditional printed reports like this one, through conferences and informal meetings and, increasingly through electronic means, including a new web site that's now under development at www.educationevolving.org.

About the authors

Kim Farris-Berg, a Minneapolis education and public policy consultant, is the primary analyst and writer for this report. Jon Schroeder, coordinator for Education/Evolving, did much of the thinking and writing for the section titled, "Dramatic growth and federal No Child Left Behind Act bring increased scrutiny, new policy questions." The report also draws on the thinking and writing—over the past several years—of the Education/Evolving leaders: Ted Kolderie, Senior Associate at the Center for Policy Studies, and Joe Graba, Senior Policy Fellow at Hamline University.

Sources

A number of individuals and organizations helped greatly in the preparation of this report. We appreciate their willingness to speak openly and to make available the documents and insights that further explain their organizations and their operations. We ask their indulgence for the simplified description, here, of what they know is an immensely complex sector of public education. Our hope has to be that we have caught the essentials accurately and explained them clearly. Many of our sources reviewed this report and indicated that we accomplished this goal.

Methods

Since only a small number of written resources were available to educate us about this group of schools, we sought to understand them on our own. We started by learning the elements of the formal laws governing these programs, and then asked those directly involved—administrators, teachers, and students—if they would help us understand what the programs look like in practice.

The report is intended to provide a basic background on Minnesota's alternative-education programs, as well as stimulate discussion and highlight a number of important policy questions. It is not meant to be formal, academic research or an exhaustive description of what alternative-education programs look like, or could eventually look like. Any thoughts you have on the content of this report are welcome and will be greatly appreciated. E-mail us: info@educationevolving.org.

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